



Workshop Summary

Devotion and Meaning in Life

December 2024 - Boston University

Organized by

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1. Overview

The workshop *Devotion and Meaning in Life* took place on December 12 and 13, 2024, at Boston University. It is the second of a **series of three interdisciplinary events** designed to foster a research program on devotion, spiritual yearning, and the connection between the two. The series is organized within the context of the project *Devotion As An Expression Of Spiritual Yearning: Conceptual And Empirical Investigations*, led by Paul Katsafanas and Jesse Preston.

What was the aim of the first workshop, *The Nature of Devotion*?

The first workshop **explored the way in which existing scientific literatures and philosophical discussions can be integrated with the study of devotion**. We hosted **seven talks** that explored central questions concerning the nature of devotion, the forms it can take, its most natural targets, the moral and epistemic stances it might require, its relationship to other forms of being wholeheartedly committed to someone or something, its place and role within the basic motivations of human beings, and its potential to turn into blind deference or fanaticism.

What was the aim of the second workshop, *Devotion and Meaning in Life*?

The second workshop **explored the relationship between devotion and meaning in life**. We invited proposals that: examine how devotion connects to our desire for a meaningful or purposeful life; explore the needs, longings, and/or motivations that drive us to express devotion; study whether different objects of devotion fulfill these needs in distinct ways; investigate the ways in which devotion is linked to identity; and analyze how devotion informs our sense of what matters and shapes our understanding of meaning and purpose.

What are the highlights of the workshop?

We hosted **nine talks** that explored questions concerning devotion and commitment, purpose and meaningfulness, authenticity and identity, self-transcendence, intimacy in friendship and personal relationships, normative dissipation and resilience, agency and rational choice, and affectivity. The workshop also brought together different disciplines, each of which contributed from its perspective to the question of the relationship between devotion and meaning in life.

After an introduction by Paul Katsafanas, **Kaitlyn Creasy** (Cal State San Bernardino) opened the workshop by distinguishing between **two forms of meaningfulness** in life: **meaningfulness as purposefulness**, which comes from substantive commitments that structure our lives, and **meaningfulness as mattering**, which involves a felt pull toward certain activities or relationships. Creasy argued that **a fully meaningful life requires both forms of meaning**. She particularly emphasized the importance of meaningfulness as mattering, which requires a distinctive affective salience exerted on us without our voluntary control. To conclude, Creasy argued that we must be attentive to how the world shows up to us; lest we lose an important part of living a meaningful life by being too attached to our current commitments.



The second talk moved us from philosophy to psychology. **Crystal L. Park** (UConn) provided a framework to define and measure meaning in life. She identified **three dimensions of global meaning**: beliefs (**how we understand the world**), goals (**what we strive for**), and a **subjective sense of meaning**, which includes comprehension (making sense of life), purpose (having goals worth striving for), and mattering (feeling that one's life is significant now and beyond death). She **introduced the Multidimensional Existential Meaning Scale (MEMS)** as a way to measure whether a person perceives her life as meaningful and explored how devotion, sacred values, and self-transcendence contribute to meaning in life.

Sanjeev Sikri (Indian Institute of Technology) examined **Sakhya Bhakti**, a form of devotion through intimate friendship, **as a path to Mokṣa** within ancient Indian philosophy. He explained that Mokṣa is the highest aim for human beings. **Through Mokṣa, one dissolves the illusion (Māyā) of separateness between God and the world**, transcends the necessity of duty, and thus attains liberation. Sakha is a form of friendship that involves complete identification with the friend. Thus, Sikri argued that cultivating Sakhya Bhava – an attitude of intimate friendship with God – dissolves the illusion of separateness between the person and the Supreme Being, making Sakhya Bhakti a powerful path to transcendence and liberation.

Antti Kauppinen (U. Helsinki) closed the first day by **exploring a puzzle about meaning in life**: while people of great achievement (e.g., Martin Luther King Jr.) are paradigmatic examples of a meaningful life, most people find meaning in personal relationships. But **can a life structured around relationships be meaningful?** Yes, according to Kauppinen. Kauppinen argued that the intimacy that characterizes **personal relationships** is an **objectively valuable** phenomenon we irreplaceably participate in insofar as we mutually disclose and transform ourselves in the relationship. In this way, **personal relationships involve a form of self-transcendence**.

Jules Wong (Penn State) opened the second day of the conference by using the notion of **devotion as a framework to explore trans gender identity**. Drawing from Katsafanas' account of devotion, Wong proposed that **devotion to self-recognition** – a robust commitment to one's gendered sense of self, which **one insulates from rational critique** – sustains trans senses of self. This form of devotion affords a mechanism to **resist normative dissipation**, the erosion of the commitment to the gendered sense of self trans people would otherwise experience under oppression. Lastly, Wong argued that this form of devotion **also allows space for self-critique**.

Ruth Chang (Oxford) explored **how we end up in what she calls choice situations and whether we are justified to be in one over others**. To this end, Chang proposed the Activist View of rationality, which claims that rationality isn't only a matter of recognizing and responding to reasons but that it also involves creating reasons through an act of will. Unlike the Passivist View, which is forced to assume that our lives are significantly random, the Activist View allows self-authorship: **we make it true that we have the most reason to follow a particular life path**. Chang argued that **activism is crucial for meaning in life**, especially when different paths are on par, since by an act of will, **we can commit to a path that becomes meaningful through the self we choose to be**.



Justin F. White (Brigham Young) explored how Merleau-Ponty's view of personal acts informs our understanding of devotion and self-conception. Personal acts involve the commitments we make and for which we make ourselves responsible. When we commit, we ask our body to relate to and perceive the world in a certain way, e.g., to be attentive to certain features of the world; not others. But this isn't fully under our control. For Merleau-Ponty, what we perceive also speaks of our (pre-reflective) bodily nature and our milieu, which shape and constrain our affordances and what appears as salient. Our commitments, thus, are fragile in that they can be interrupted by the tension between our pre-reflective and reflective selves. In fact, White argued that one's explicit self-conception may find resistance in one's pre-reflective self.

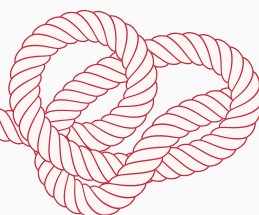
Casey Doyle (Binghamton) began by raising an objection to Katsafanas' account of devotion, arguing that, so understood, devotion cannot be properly distinguished from self-deception. Katsafanas defines devotion as a dialectically invulnerable commitment. Doyle pointed out that pretend reasoning can be subjectively indistinguishable from dialectical invulnerability: e.g., a spouse insulates his marriage from rational critique, not out of devotion but because he cannot fathom a divorce. Doyle proposed that devotion should instead be understood as a response to an inner necessity for self-transcendence: some objects call for our devotion such that we feel the need to make ourselves worthy of the object of devotion.

Joshua Hicks (Texas A&M) closed the workshop by exploring – relying on empirical studies in psychological science – the relationship between authenticity, sacred values, and sustained commitment to goals. Hicks argued, first, that the subjective experience of authenticity is correlated with whether one is expressing or acting in accordance with one's true or core self. Hick showed, second, that there is a positive correlation between experiences of authenticity and behavior consistent with one's core values. Lastly, Hicks demonstrated that feelings of authenticity predict sustained commitment to a goal.

After each talk, we opened the Q&A. This afforded a great opportunity for attendants to provide feedback, raise objections, or ask questions to clarify and gain a better understanding of the speaker's claims. The coffee breaks, lunches, and dinners were also excellent spaces for informal conversations.

What was the size and composition of the audience?

- Around 45 persons attended the workshop, *Devotion and Meaning in Life*.
- The audience comprised faculty and graduate students from universities across the United States, including faculty and graduate students from Boston University, Brown University, UC Berkeley, UC Riverside, and Harvard University, among others.





2. Schedule

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 12

Photonics Center, Room 203.
Boston University.

11:15 - 12:15	Kaitlyn Creasy (Cal State San Bernardino) "Meaning at the Limits of Practical Agency" <i>Chair: Malcolm Morano (Harvard)</i>
12:30 - 2:00	<i>Lunch (for speakers and chairs, at STH 541)</i>
2:00 - 3:15	Keynote: Crystal Park (UConn) "Values, Devotion, and Meaning in Life: A Meaning-Making Perspective" <i>Chair: Alan Mittleman (Jewish Theological Seminary)</i>
3:30 - 4:30	Sanjeev Sikri (Indian Institute of Technology) "Ekrūpatam and Sakhyabhakti: Finding Identity through Committed Friendships in Ancient Indian Philosophy" <i>Chair: Luca Ferrero (UC Riverside)</i>
4:45 - 6:00	Keynote: Antti Kauppinen (Univ. of Helsinki) "The Ties that Bind" <i>Chair: Daniel Star (BU)</i>
6:30	<i>Dinner at Bar 'Cino (for speakers and chairs)</i>

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 13

Kilachand Center, Room 101.
Boston University.

10:00 - 11:00	Jules Wong (Penn State) "Devotion, Dissipation, and Gender" <i>Chair: Keilee Bessho (UC Riverside)</i>
11:15 - 12:30	Keynote: Ruth Chang (Oxford) "Choice, Commitment, and Meaning in Life" <i>Chair: Jesse Preston (Warwick)</i>
12:30 - 2:00	<i>Lunch (for speakers and chairs, on-site)</i>
2:00 - 3:00	Justin White (Brigham Young University) "Devotion, Fragile Meaning, and the Selves of Merleau-Ponty" <i>Chair: Olivia Bailey (UC Berkeley)</i>
3:15 - 4:15	Casey Doyle (Binghamton) "Meaning, Self-Deception, and Dialectical Invulnerability" <i>Chair: Pol Pardini (BU)</i>
4:30 - 5:45	Keynote: Joshua Hicks (Texas A&M) "Sacred Values, Authenticity, and Meaningful Goal Pursuits" <i>Chair: Tyler Sproule (Univ. Illinois-Chicago)</i>
6:00	<i>Reception on-site (open to everyone)</i>

3. Summaries of the talks



Kaitlyn Creasy

California State University, San Bernardino

Associate Professor, Department of Philosophy

“Meaning at the Limits of Practical Agency”

Creasy explored two distinct forms of meaningfulness in life, which she called **meaningfulness as purposefulness** and **meaningfulness as mattering**. To motivate this distinction, Creasy began by presenting some examples of persons who were committed to a relationship or project but did not feel gripped by them: e.g., an immigration lawyer who remains dedicated to her work, who still finds it valuable upon deliberation, but is no longer moved by it. Clearly, the lawyer’s enduring commitment **imbues her life with a sense of direction, structure, and even security**; in this way, her life has *some* meaning. This form of meaning is what Creasy calls **meaningfulness as purposefulness**, which is afforded through **substantive commitments that we form willingly**. But Creasy emphasized that, even if we grant that the life of the lawyer is meaningful in this sense, something is still lacking. In short, a fully meaningful life involves not only the form of meaning we attain through substantive commitments but also through engaging in the kinds of projects, relationships, or activities that move us. For instance, the lawyer’s life would be *more* meaningful if her work gripped her as it once did.

Meaningfulness as mattering captures this form of meaning that the lawyer lacks. This species of meaning in life **requires** what Creasy calls **psychic-affective traction, a distinctive, intense, affective salience** that some things exert on us **without our voluntary control**. In Creasy’s case, it is surfing. For others, it may be environmental law, a lover, or a job. Creasy argued that, in all these cases, what is distinctive is that we experience a **felt pull**; we feel drawn toward some activities or objects (even when we are not in their presence), which capture and demand our attention, and we feel motivated to engage with them. In this way, this felt pull **tends to inspire substantive commitments**. According to Creasy, when something matters to us in this way, and we can successfully experience it (which is not always the case, nor always under our control), we live our lives as distinctively meaningful. In these cases of meaningfulness as mattering, the person *cannot help* but perceive the object or activity as valuable and distinctively significant for her. Thus, there is something **ineliminably passive** about this form of meaning. This, Creasy maintained, is **key for understanding how we should orient ourselves toward life**: we should be attentive to how the world shows itself to us and foster certain **existential flexibility**, particularly regarding commitments that might prevent us from experiencing what matters to us.

In the **Q&A**, responding to questions about the tension between **purposefulness and mattering**, Creasy stressed that these are **conceptually distinct but practically interwoven in life**. Creasy also clarified that mattering may, but need not, be responsive to impersonal values. There is an important point of contingency, and we may feel this pull towards things that *should not* matter to us. But this doesn’t mean that we don’t experience them as meaningful.



Crystal Park

University of Connecticut

Professor, Department of Psychology

“Values, Devotion, and Meaning in Life: A Meaning-Making Perspective”

Park began by situating her research as following the path set by psychologist Viktor E. Frankl, who argued that what humans strive for is not a tensionless state nor the discharge of tension at any cost (as the father of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, would have us believe). Instead, **our primary motivation is to find meaning in our lives**. But what is meaning? Park distinguished between **three dimensions** of what she called **global meaning**: **global beliefs**, which shape our general understanding of the world and the self; **global goals**, which consist of the ideals or states toward which we strive; and the **subjective sense of meaning**. Park’s research focuses, among others, on this latter dimension of global meaning.

This **subjective sense of meaning** consists of **three dimensions**: **comprehension** (whether I can make sense of my life and the things that happen to me), **purpose** (whether I have aims and goals that guide my life and are worth striving for), and **mattering** (whether I feel that my life is of importance now and will continue to matter after I die). Park explained that, relying on this tripartite approach, she and L. George have developed a **Multidimensional Existential Meaning Scale** (MEMS) to measure whether a person perceives (and reports) her life as meaningful. For instance, their research using MEMS found that the reported experience of meaning remained stable over the first year of COVID within the US community they sampled.

Park suggested that her research also sheds light on how to understand the need for meaning that Viktor Frankl first focused on. This “will to meaning” should be understood, Park explained, as a **need for a functional meaning system**, which is **satisfied by a meaning framework** that has the explanatory power to address the three dimensions of the subjective sense of meaning. In short, a meaning framework affords answers to the questions of whether one can comprehend the world and oneself, whether one has worthy goals to pursue, and whether one matters.

Park concluded her talk by posing four questions for discussion, which may open avenues for further interdisciplinary research: **How are functional meaning systems, self-transcendence, and spiritual yearning related?** To what are people devoted? What are sacred values? What determines the object or form of devotion? To begin exploring these questions, she established illuminating connections between the ongoing research on devotion and sacred values at the Devotion and Spiritual Yearning project and contemporaneous research in both sociology and psychology.

The **Q&A** made manifest the different perspectives that psychologists and philosophers take in trying to comprehend similar phenomena: the former focusing primarily on its empirical findings and the latter on the conceptual work we need to capture the phenomena accurately. This led to a fruitful conversation – which continued after the talk – about **the roles of philosophy and psychology and how to bridge the gaps between these disciplines**.



Sanjeev Sikri

Indian Institute of Technology

Doctoral Student, Department of Philosophy

“Ekrūpatam and Sakhya-bhakti: Finding Identity through Committed Friendships in Ancient Indian Philosophy”

Sikri’s talk explored **Sakhya Bhakti** –devotion through the most intimate form of friendship– as a path to attaining Mokṣa –understood as liberation from worldly attachments and structures and identification with the Supreme reality– within the framework of Ancient Indian Philosophy. Relying on Indian classical texts, Sikri argued that Sakhya Bhakti leads the individual devotee to identify with the supreme being, **eliminating the illusion (Māyā) of the separateness between the individual self and the Supreme reality, thus leading to Mokṣa.**

Sikri, aware that the audience lacked a strong background in Ancient Indian philosophy, began by introducing Mokṣa within the framework of Puruṣārta, i.e., the four classes of values that human beings should strive for. These are: Dharma (religious and moral laws, duties), Kāma (sexual and aesthetic pleasure), Artha (wealth and political power), and Mokṣa (liberation of social values).

Sikri explained that **Mokṣa is the highest aim for human beings** but emphasized that we should not confuse Mokṣa with Adharma. Adharma is the lack of moral order and thus threatens the balance in life that is necessary within the cycle of Saṃsāra (the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth). Mokṣa, on the other hand, doesn’t represent lawlessness, but it’s the **abandonment of the established order for self-realization**. Sikri explained that, through Mokṣa, one dissolves the illusion (Māyā) of separateness between God and the world, transcends the necessity of Dharma, and thus attains liberation from Saṃsāra.

Of the many paths to Mokṣa –Yoga, Jñāna, Karma...– Sikri focused on Bhakti, or devotion, and specifically on **Sakhya Bhakti, the form of devotion expressed through Sakhya, or friendship**. Fundamental to Sakhya Bhakti is Sakhya Bhava, the affective disposition toward the Supreme Being that inspires devotion and involves, among other things, seeing the Supreme Being as a friend. But not just any kind of friend. Unlike Mitra and Suhrd, which are both forms of friendship that presuppose seeing the friend as separate from oneself, **Sakha involves complete identification with the friend**. It’s the most intimate form of friendship. With this in mind, Sikri explained that cultivating Sakhya Bhava involves adopting an attitude in which one regards God as identical to oneself. And if this is so, Sikri concluded, we can understand why Sakhya Bhakti is a path to eliminating the illusion of separateness between oneself and the Supreme Being and a way to attain Mokṣa.

The **Q&A** focused on bridging the notions of friendship and devotion, as explained by Sikri, with how these notions are understood in academia in the US. One interesting insight from the discussion was understanding that Sakha with other humans could cultivate Sakhya Bhakti, i.e., **intimate friendships help develop the attitude necessary for an intimate relationship with God.**



Antti Kauppinen

University of Helsinki

Professor, Department of Philosophy

“The Ties that Bind”

Kauppinen set out to **solve a puzzle about meaning in life**. Consider, he said, Martin Luther King Jr. His life was irrefutably meaningful due to his significant contributions to fighting racial discrimination. Yet many of us don't live lives characterized by such achievements. Instead, we often appeal to our personal relationships to claim that our lives are meaningful. This raises a puzzle: **if meaningfulness is typically associated with people of great achievements, how can personal relationships contribute to meaning in life?**

Kauppinen claimed that **appealing just to the experience of meaning won't solve the puzzle**, as we can be mistaken about whether our life, in fact, has meaning. According to Kauppinen, just having a sense of purpose that directs and structures our lives won't do either. Some purposes may be trivial. Kauppinen explained that to amount to meaning, purposes must be potentially significant. Indeed, Kauppinen argued that our experience of meaningfulness must be fitting for our life to have meaning, i.e., the sense of purpose and significance that we experience must track something valuable we aim at and important we achieve (such that responses of pride and fulfillment would be fitting). Kauppinen, thus, argued that **meaning in life has an objective element: it comes from aiming at and making an effort to bring about an objectively valuable state of affairs**. The question, Kauppinen continued, is how personal relationships – characterized by the care, intimacy, and mutual enjoyment between (two) persons – fit into this picture. Even if we grant that we promote something of value with personal relationships, there are many other impersonal activities that (seemingly) could objectively bring about more value. To further complicate the puzzle, Kauppinen noted that personal relationships are not easily replaceable: abandoning one in favor of another that is more promising in terms of the value it could bring about often lessens rather than increases the meaning in our lives.

To solve this difficult puzzle, **Kauppinen emphasized the role that intimacy plays in positive personal relationships**. In these relationships, we don't simply do things for the sake of the other, but **we shape each other, disclose ourselves to one another, and respond to the particular self that the other is, transforming each other in the process**. Indeed, Kauppinen continued, personal relationships are significant not because I achieve something of value external to them, but because of the intimacy itself that is created between partners, friends, etc. Relationships, thus, involve a distinct way of creating – and being part of – an objectively valuable state of affairs. Indeed, **in a personal relationship, it's not just that I feel I matter but that I belong to something that matters**. It's an experience of self-transcendence. In Kauppinen's words: “This is a way of mattering to someone who matters, and mattering in a way that makes us irreplaceable.” In this way, Kauppinen distances himself from views that explain the meaning we find in relationships just in terms of the kind of commitment they involve – a view that Katsafanas defends. Relationships are meaningful because they involve intimacy, which involves more than a robust commitment: in significant personal relationships, we transform ourselves and each other. **We find relationships meaningful**, thus, Kauppinen concluded, **through this experience of communion with something of inherent value**.



Jules Wong

Penn State University

PhD Candidate, Department of Philosophy

“Devotion, Dissipation, and Gender”

Wong argued that we can draw on **the notion of devotion to explore the gendered senses of self of trans people**. It offers an alternative to the two vocabularies often used in the discourse about trans gender identity, which either appeal to the language of ontology or the language of preference. Using the language of devotion can help us go beyond these vocabularies while also capturing the everyday feelings and mundane aims that characterize transition. **Wong drew on Katsafanas’ account of devotion**, which defines devotion as a robust kind of commitment that is insulated from rational critique.

Wong proposed that **devotion to self-recognition sustains trans senses of self**. Self-recognition, Wong explained, involves the ethical first-person authority over one’s gender, instantiated in the illocutionary act of publicly self-identifying with a gender. Drawing from Talia Mae Bettcher, Wong explained that, in trans communities, this ethical norm has an authoritative role, i.e., when a person asserts that they’re “a woman, a man, or something else, one takes them at their word, regardless of ... cis-typical indicators of sex/gender.” Wong’s view, thus, is that **devotion to gender self-recognition is a robust commitment to one’s gendered sense of self, a commitment one insulates from rational critique**. According to Wong, their view can explain important everyday occurrences that trans people experience. First, it can account for the moral emotions (e.g., shame) trans persons feel when they undermine their commitment (e.g., by going along with misgendering), which indicates they think they are betraying an **inviolable commitment**. Second, it explains why, despite the high costs suffered in virtue of being trans, this commitment remains intact. Indeed, Wong argued that **devotion to gender self-recognition plays a key role in insulating trans people from normative dissipation**.

Drawing from Katsafanas, Wong explained that normative dissipation is the erosion of one’s commitment when realizing that it’s only one among many, all equally justified, with no grounds to privilege one’s own over the others. But Wong took this notion a bit further. It’s characteristic of oppression, Wong argued, that it obscures the suffering it inflicts, instilling in the oppressed a need to justify their resistance. Moreover, oppressed communities are fluent in the languages and epistemologies of both their marginalized communities and the hegemonic community, and relying on hegemonic resources is always less burdensome. Thus, Wong continued, **there is always a pull to justify one’s commitments and to concede too much ground to oppressive norms**. Devotion to gendered self-recognition serves as a mechanism to insulate one’s gender identity and avoid falling into normative dissipation. This doesn’t entail that this devotion precludes self-critique; rather, Wong argued, this **self-critique must take place within the security of the community**, where the impermeability of devotion can be breached.

In the **Q&A**, Wong elaborated further on the threat of normative dissipation. They clarified that part of the problem is that trans people may want to retain certain parts of their identities that are already shaped by oppression. Furthermore, keeping track of all the forms of oppression is, by nature, very difficult, which further exacerbates the threat of dissipation and, thus, nihilism.



Ruth Chang

Oxford University

Professor, Faculty of Philosophy

“Choice, Commitment, and Meaning in Life”

Chang set out to **solve** a deep **puzzle of practical reasoning** and show that a solution to this puzzle illuminates a form of meaning that we can all, in principle, have access to just by being a rational agent. Chang pointed out that all of us in the workshop are in what she calls a **choice situation: a situation in which we can choose between different courses of action**, e.g., to keep listening to her talk or leave. But, Chang continued, we could be in another choice situation with a different set of options available: had our lives gone differently, we could be choosing between going on a trip or saving that money. The puzzle is: **How do we come to be in one choice situation rather than another, and how can we be justified in being in that choice situation rather than others we could be in at that time?**

Chang **first argued against three debunking approaches** that deny that we can, in fact, choose the choice situation we’re in. All these views, Chang argued, are either **too permissive or too restrictive**: they either assume that all options are available to us in a single master choice situation, which overstates the range of options that we can plausibly consider as humans at any given time; or they assume that, at any given time, there is only one restricted choice situation available to us, which overstates how causally or rationally determined we’re.

To solve the puzzle, Chang defended what she called the **Activist View of rationality**, which she contrasted with the Passivist View. Passivism, Chang explained, assumes that all reasons are given, and that rationality is only a matter of recognizing and responding appropriately to reasons. Activism grants that **rationality consists in recognizing and responding to given reasons**, but claims further that it **also involves creating reasons for ourselves that can tip the balance when different options are on par** and the given reasons can’t settle the question. Creating or willing a reason in this way, Chang explained, is a kind of internal commitment that involves the self. Chang grants that the passivist view can offer a solution to the puzzle. At any given time, a rational agent will have sufficient reasons to be in different choice situations at the same time. Thus, one could justifiably pick any of these. But, if this is so, Chang continued, it would mean that one’s current choice situation is significantly random. Insofar as choices between different permissible choice situations pile up over time, one can find oneself living a life that one has no justification to live compared to a myriad of other possible lives one could have justifiably lived. The Activist View, Chang argued, doesn’t have this problem. Insofar as one can create reasons when given reasons run out, **“we can make it true through an activity of our will that we have most reason to follow one path in life rather than another.”** This is especially relevant, Chang concluded, when the choice situations are on par in regards to meaning in life: by an act of the will, the agent can choose one particular path, which she will make **distinctively meaningful for the kind of self she has chosen to be.**

The **Q&A** explored whether activism runs into similar problems as passivism, whether passivism can appeal to the notion of robust commitment (i.e., devotion) to solve the puzzle, and what is the range of the choice situations available to us at any given time.



Justin White

Brigham Young University

Associate Professor, Department of Philosophy

“Devotion, Fragile Meaning, and the Selves of Merleau-Ponty”

White explored a tension that emerges from Merleau-Ponty’s account of personal acts in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, and how it can inform our understanding of devotion and self-conception. White began by outlining Merleau-Ponty’s basic picture of human existence. For Merleau-Ponty, **we’re not disembodied minds** that have control over a body that is a mere mechanism, but **we’re embodied beings**, i.e., we live through our bodies navigating the world around us (the milieu) both pre-reflectively and reflectively. Crucially, White claimed, **our embodiment shapes our perception of the world**. What we see and the options salient to us speak of our situated engagement with the world. **Much of this**, White continued, **is pre-reflective**, i.e., it doesn’t necessarily depend on our rational agency, but on our bodily nature and the milieu around us, which shape and constrain our affordances and what appears as salient. Still, White explained that, according to Merleau-Ponty, **our bodily existence has different dimensions**. Part of what it means to be a human body is that we have automatic reflexes, e.g., pupils dilate. Habits are neither mere reflexes nor reflective commitments but are interwoven with both. For example, typing on a keyboard begins as a conscious effort but, through practice, becomes a habit and operates below the level of awareness. Lastly, **personal acts involve the commitments we make and for which we make ourselves responsible** (e.g., deciding to become a mathematician). White argued that **reflexes, habits, and personal acts interweave, shaping together our perception of the world** and defining the projects that structure our lives. Projects, White explained, polarize what appears as salient to us, even when we have not consciously adopted them.

Relying on this picture, White shed light on the tensions that emerge between our personal acts and our pre-reflective selves. When we commit to an activity, we ask our body to relate to and perceive the world in a certain way. But this isn’t fully under our control. Insofar as our perception is already shaped by reflexes, habits, and other personal acts, **there is a tension between the different conscious and unconscious projects that have a hold over our body**. This means that the projects that come from personal acts may take time to take hold and may only take hold to a certain extent. This, White argued, illuminates a nuanced picture of the relationship between commitments and our self-conception. First, our commitments are fragile and can be interrupted by the interactions between the different dimensions of our selves. Second, White continued, **one’s explicit self-conception may find resistance in one’s pre-reflective self**. In fact, who we are is illuminated by how the world appears to us, even if we wish that it wouldn’t present itself this way. This entails, third, that we can discover that we’re devoted to projects that operate below the level of awareness. Thus, White concluded, the projects that structure our lives are not entirely up to us: they’re the result of the interplay of our milieu, others, and our complex selves.

In the **Q&A**, White explored further the connection between personal acts and meaning in life. Insofar as our commitments may have a limited hold on us, White explained, what appears significant to us is also not fully under our control. This led to a discussion about different kinds of saliences (affective, attentional...) and how they relate to meaning in life.



Casey Doyle

Binghamton University

Assistant Professor, Department of Philosophy

“Meaning, Self-Deception, and Dialectical Invulnerability”

Doyle proposed a novel account of devotion and argued that it’s not vulnerable to an objection that challenges Katsafanas’ voluntaristic view of devotion. In *Philosophy of Devotion*, Doyle explained, Katsafanas defines devotion as a dialectically invulnerable commitment, i.e., a commitment insulated from the force of reasons against holding it. This doesn’t mean that one cannot think about the justificatory status of the commitment; only that the commitment is not responsive to justificatory reasoning. Doyle explained further that, according to Katsafanas, devotion allows us to engage in certain relationships and projects that would otherwise be inaccessible (e.g., parenthood). The problem, Doyle argued, is that devotion so understood cannot easily be distinguished from certain forms of self-deception.

Indeed, Doyle argued that, in pretend reasoning, a person may treat a certain view as dialectically invulnerable not because she’s wholeheartedly committed to it, but because she cannot or just doesn’t want to be truly open to the force of justificatory reasoning. In these cases, the view is insulated from rational critique not because my commitment is sincere but because my reasoning is insincere. Consider, Doyle suggested, a spouse who treats his marriage as dialectically invulnerable because he cannot fathom the possibility of a divorce; or a parent who pretends to reason with her son about whether to quit soccer while believing that quitting isn’t an option. These are cases of dialectical invulnerability, but not of devotion. The problem, Doyle argued, is that many of the cases of pretend devotion are subjectively indistinguishable from devotion proper, especially if the stakes are high. This, Doyle continued, betrays a deeper problem with Katsafanas’ voluntaristic account. In his view, one can just pick what one is devoted to and, thus, what one treats as dialectically invulnerable. Accordingly, dialectical invulnerability is supposed to be sufficient for devotion. But it isn’t, as cases of pretend reasoning illustrate.

We need, Doyle argued, another account of devotion that draws from romanticism instead of voluntarism. Paradigmatic cases of devotion aren’t cases where we just pick or choose an object and treat it as dialectically invulnerable. According to Doyle, certain objects call for our devotion. Devotion is the expression of an inner necessity for self-transcendence, to be part of something bigger. And we experience or feel that some objects are worthy of our devotion, while others aren’t. In this sense, devotion demands a certain form of self-awareness. Doyle concluded by pointing out that there is a relationship of reciprocity between the value of the object of devotion and one’s own value. Part of what it means to be called by the value of the object of devotion is to want to make oneself worthy of it. It’s a matter of integrity, such that betraying the object amounts to degrading oneself.

The Q&A was primarily focused on exploring whether Doyle’s view can indeed overcome the problems raised against Katsafanas. This was an opportunity for Doyle to explain further his understanding of the self-awareness involved in devotion, which is a mark of conscience. Genuine devotion, Doyle suggested, doesn’t allow for self-deception.



Joshua Hicks

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“Sacred Values, Authenticity, and Meaningful Goal Pursuits”

Hicks’s talk answered **three interrelated questions**: What is authenticity? What role do (sacred) values play in experiences of authenticity? And how do subjective experiences of authenticity influence goal commitment? To do so, Hicks relied on findings in psychological science.

Hicks began by acknowledging that the study of authenticity in psychological science is relatively new. Part of the problem, he explained, is that authenticity may mean different things, so the field has been traditionally reluctant to explore the subject. That said, in the past twenty years, empirical research has found a strong association between experiences of being or knowing one’s true self and experiences of well-being and meaning in life. Insofar as authenticity is also strongly associated with the subjective experience of meaning in life, some psychologists have theorized that authenticity is tied to the notion of a true self. In other words, **to be authentic is to express, or act in accordance with, one’s true self**. Hicks explained further that the true self is typically understood as the characteristics that one thinks define who one truly is, regardless of whether these features align with how one acts. The task is, thus, to narrow in on what these features are. It seems plausible, Hicks argued, that the features that define one’s true self refer to dispositional traits, such as extroversion, conscientiousness, agreeableness, openness, or neuroticism. But studies demonstrate that personality traits, in fact, don’t reliably **predict feelings of authenticity**. We must find another candidate.

Hicks proposed that the **(sacred) values one is committed to may play this key role**. Indeed, he claimed that several studies demonstrate an **important positive correlation between experiences of authenticity and behavior consistent with one’s core values**, meaning that subjects typically reported feeling more authentic the more they acted in accordance with those values that they consider central to who they are. Indeed, Hicks shared some of the empirical studies he has conducted in collaboration with other researchers, which show that when core values are in play – e.g., betraying a friend, inflicting harm on a dog – subjects experiences of authenticity generally increased when these values were respected.

Hicks concludes his talk by explaining that **subjective authenticity has also been shown to be positively correlated with sustained commitment to a goal**. Hicks shared again another empirical study he had conducted, which tracked subjective authenticity in relation to the motivation to participate in political activities and actual political engagement. The study demonstrated that **feelings of authenticity indeed predict sustained behavior**. The question is: why is this so? Hicks explained that feelings of authenticity cultivate cognitive, motivational, and social fit (and thus feelings of fulfillment), which could explain why a subject potentially sustains the goal that generated those feelings in the first place.

The **Q&A** provided philosophers in the audience an opportunity to get a broader sense of the current research in psychological science. There was interest, for instance, in understanding whether studies have distinguished between moral and non-moral values or have tracked the **relationship between subjective authenticity and the costs incurred by acting on one’s values**.



4. Takeaways

Devotion and meaning in life:

- Some speakers explored the **fragility of some commitments** central to living a meaningful life; for instance, in conditions of oppression, or because of our pre-reflective being in the world (Wong and White).
- Some speakers emphasized the **role of devotion in protecting** commitments **against the erosion of normative dissipation** (Wong; also Katsafanas), while others were more skeptical about the claim that devotion can truly insulate commitments (Doyle and White).
- Some speakers understood **devotion as tied to spirituality** or religious experience (Sikri), while others emphasized that **devotion can take the form of secular commitments** (Wong, Creasy, Doyle, Park, and Hicks).
- There was substantive disagreement on whether we actively pick the object of devotion by an act of the will (Chang, Wong; also, Katsafanas) or whether objects of devotion call on us in some way (Doyle, Kauppinen, and Creasy).

On meaning in life:

- Most speakers acknowledged that **meaning in life can have both objective and subjective elements**, but they differed in the extent to which each contributes to meaning in life (Creasy, Kauppinen, Chang, Park, and Hicks).
- There was some agreement on the **importance of being attentive to how meaning reveals itself to us**, whether **affectively** as an emotional pull, **perceptually** in how things show up in our experience, or **evaluatively** in terms of whether objects appear worthy of our devotion (Creasy, White, and Doyle). This received some resistance, especially from those who emphasized the objective elements of meaningfulness.
- Some speakers argued that **commitment** to projects or relationships **affords a stable form of meaning** (Chang, Doyle, and Kauppinen), while others emphasized that **excessively focusing on commitments** leaves us out of touch with the non-reflective parts of ourselves, potentially **losing on other forms of meaningfulness** (Creasy and White).
- Some speakers also explored the idea that **meaning in life** involves **going beyond the self** through commitments or devotion (Kauppinen, Sikri, Park, and Doyle). Moreover, the **intimacy** characteristic of personal relationships seemed an important pathway for **self-transcendence** (Kauppinen and Sikri).
- The two speakers that contributed from the perspective of psychology emphasized the **role of core values in the subjective experience of meaning in life** (Hicks and Park).
- It was clear that philosophical and psychological perspectives can offer complementary approaches to understanding meaning in life, with philosophers focusing on conceptual clarity and psychologists on providing informative frameworks that can be empirically verified.



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